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By-Kvapil, Charline R.; Schellenberg, Louise S.

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A group of citizens in Phoenix, Arizona, in 1968, organized Right to Read, Inc., to combat potential censors. The purpose of the group is "to promote freedom of access to knowledge and to resist interference with that freedom," especially in schools and libraries. The members hope to improve the community climate before issues on censorship arise by working with and supporting professional educators, by making radio, TV, and personal appearances, by circulating books and pamphlets relevant to intellectual freedom, and by striving to return the burden of proof to the censor. (SW)

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THE RIGHT TO READ

by Charline R. Kvapil, Member of Right to Read, Inc. and
Louise S. Schellenberg, President of Right to Read, Inc.

Do you remember the pictures in the news reels of the 1930's of the Nazis making huge bonfires of books incompatible to their ideology? If not, you do know what happened in Czechoslovakia just last summer when it was occupied by the Russians and their allies. One of their first actions was to clamp complete censorship on all news media. These are the ways of the dictatorship, and completely intolerable to most freedom-loving Americans.

Yet there is a growing number of well-meaning citizens, heedless to the lessons of history, who claim to believe in democracy, yet who would impose their views on the rest of us by limiting many of our most cherished freedoms. It would have frightened and disgusted you had you happened to be at the meeting of the Phoenix Union High School Board at Central High School on the night of May 4, 1967. The issue was a parent's request that the book MAJOR AMERICAN POETS be removed from the approved reading list for advanced Junior English classes because it contained the poem "i sing of olaf" by e.e. cummings. Here was a case where the questionnaire suggested in the STUDENT's RIGHT TO READ of the NCTE had been used, and the Instructional Materials Review Committee had presented its opinion that the book should be retained. We (as an unorganized group) had presented a petition signed by 90 citizens begging that the book be retained - all to no avail. Completely ignoring all the rules of gentlemanly debate, the pro-book banners heckled, shouted down the "con" speakers including the Superintendent, spoke without being recognized, spoke beyond the three minute limit to shouts from the back of the hall, "He can have my three minutes", and finally badgered the school board into a 3 to 2 vote in favor of removing the book from the approved reading lists, and also the libraries in the system.

These were the birth pangs of Right to Read, Inc. We had been disturbed in 1964 when HUCKLEBERRY FINN and the OX-BOW INCIDENT had been challenged, and even sent a delegation to call on the Superintendent of Public Instruction at that time, but it was not until the 1967 incident that we determined to organize in order to be ready and more effective should a similar incident recur. Ernestine Gilbreth Carey, the co-author of CHEAPER BY THE DOZEN and BELLES ON THEIR TOES has been the prime mover behind our organization. Were it not for her eternal vigilance, I am sure that many of us would have found household chores, social obligations, or other civic activities too engrossing to bother with Right to Read. Once involved however we were further disturbed by Mrs. Retha K. Foster's article which appeared in the ARIZONA ENGLISH BULLETIN of May 1966, "Censorship and Arizona High Schools - Results of a Survey." We found that many of the conditions described in Mrs. Foster's article still maintain. Many schools use abridged versions rather than the complete novel, and as a knowledgeable librarian recently remarked, eighty per cent of the librarians are "playing it safe" in order to avoid the selection of material which might be controversial.

We were convinced. On November 21, 1967, a meeting was called and an organizing committee was elected and tentative by-laws were approved. An interested lawyer - who accepted no fee and billed us only for his costs, drew up the necessary Articles of Incorporation, and on March 29, 1968 we were officially incorporated as a tax-exempt organization. We did not apply for tax-deductible status to the donors of dues and donations as that would have prohibited our becoming involved in school board elections which are unfortunately considered "political", but which we consider the very core of the problem in protecting the student's right to read. Our twenty board members include distinguished civic-minded people whose political affiliations are as varied as their personal interests and occupations. The by-laws are routine with the exception that it was provided that although welcome as members, people who are on the payroll of a tax

supported educational institution or library may not serve on the board of directors. This was done with the thought that a lay organization would be of more assistance to educators or librarians when they were challenged than could an organization which was directed by professional people. Our purpose as stated in the by-laws is as follows:

> In the belief that democracy benefits from breadth of inquiry and suffers from its limitation, Right to Read has been formed to promote freedom of access to knowledge and to resist interference with that freedom.

The board of directors also adopted a policy that, unless revoked, our main attentions would be directed to freedom to read in our schools and in our libraries.

Two unsuccessful attempts to ban books occurred in Tempe in 1967 and 1968 when LAND OF THE FREE, a U. S. history textbook, and TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD, a Pulitzer award book, were challenged. In another school district the Bantam book 50 GREAT SHORT STORIES is not permitted by the principal, a former athletic coach.

Ronald T. LaConte in the CONNECTICUT ENGLISH NEWS, Fall 1967 warns us that the most active censors are in the administrative and departmental offices. He says, "Year after year, under the guise of 'prudent selection' these censors do a far more effective job of limiting the student's right to read and the teacher's right to teach than all the pressure groups combined." He further suggests that English teachers be guided in selection of reading materials by the three criteria advanced by J. N. Hook some years ago: Interest, readiness, and worthwhileness in order to avoid "the literary sterility of antiseptic classrooms in which books are dissected in quiet monotones."

In June of 1968 we were alerted to the fact that Station KRUX in Phoenix was broadcasting three editorials a day urging citizens to attend the Phoenix Union High School District board meeting and to challenge the Academic Freedom plank in the new teachers' contract. A typical statement in their editorial was:

> If the Board of Education approves the proposals on academic freedom it will be possible for communists, fascists, anarchists, socialists, and political freaks to teach in the high schools and to freely express every excessive thought which comes to their tortured brains. They could advocate violent revolution or free love, prostitution or dope addiction so long as they said this was their opinion.

Ten of us were present at the school board meeting in question prepared to speak against any opposition that might develop. As it turned out, no opposition appeared.

Right to Read also took advantage of the station's offer of free time to a differing opinion by replying (in part) as follows:

> Right to Read approves the article on Academic Freedom in the recently adopted Phoenix Union High School teachers' contract.
>
> Right to Read is a group of responsible citizens who have faith in the traditional democratic open forum of free education, and in the coming generation. Right to Read believes that our young people need to grow in the American tradition of access to knowledge - the tradition that has produced our great heroes. Those remarkable men like Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, arrived at the conclusions which we cherish through reading widely, thinking flexibly, and discussing impartially the urgent questions of their times.....
>
> A generation of responsible citizens can never mature in an atmosphere which ignores realities, removes books from libraries, and discourages honest discussion.....

> Right to Read believes that your duty as a concerned citizen is to elect a responsible school board, who will select responsible administrators, who will employ responsible teachers, who must then be encouraged to teach in a stimulating atmosphere, free of intimidation. Those who would imply that teachers would not choose to educate our children in the best sense of the word, "education", by teaching them to think impartially on all subjects to the best of their abilities, do our children a disservice. Progress and discipline in our schools depends on faith in our teachers. Don't undermine it!

We hope it is clear that Right to Read believes its function is to take supportive but not initiative action. Right to Read is not trying to supplant either the professional educator or librarian, nor are we trying to infringe on the role of the school or library trustee. It is the job of the trustees to set policy and to see to it that the professionals carry out that policy. It is the layman's job - the job of Right to Read - to see that the right trustees are elected, and to encourage librarians, teachers, and administrators to work together for intellectual freedom.

But the major role of the layman - and of Right to Read - is to improve the community climate, and to improve that climate before issues arise. It is not enough to speak up when intellectual freedom is threatened. Indeed as we learned bitterly a year ago last spring, it is probably too late to try to educate then. Teachers know that the time to teach is not when passions and emotions are aroused to fever pitch, but in advance of heightened, tense community situations. We are proceeding on the assumption that we have the support of an enlightened community. We are simply trying to get the voice of the enlightened community heard. We would like to assure that all have a chance to be heard - not just a vocal minority. In a climate of free inquiry we would like to see the onus put on the censor so that he must defend his position, so that he will feel out of step and certainly will not be crowned as the moral hero.

How can we change the community climate? We hope we will be able to circulate a library of books and pamphlets relevant to intellectual freedom, books like Nelson's **THE CENSOR AND THE SCHOOLS**. We hope we will be able to make radio, TV, and personal appearances before large and small groups such as PTA or wherever we can find an audience willing to listen to a discussion on intellectual freedom or on books considered by some, controversial. But most of all we will listen to suggestions from professional educators as to how best we can assist them in combatting pressures on the schools.

We have only begun. We want to reverse the trend whereby the censors have managed to require that the rest of us prove that the books they want to suppress have literary merit or redeeming social value. The burden of proof that has mysteriously moved to us must be returned to the censor. Books like **A FAREWELL TO ARMS**, **INTRUDER IN THE DUST**, and **BRAVE NEW WORLD** must be returned to school library shelves. And above all schools and libraries using only safe and insipid materials must be made to realize that they are not only short-changing the young people, but threatening the democratic process. This we believe is the greatest danger of all. Why do some schools find it necessary to have closed shelves, while others do not? Why should not the college-bound student at Phoenix Union find ready access to those books necessary to his college preparation as well as the student at Central or Camelback? Have we so little faith in ourselves, our children, and the democratic process that we make only safe materials readily available to all students?

We hope that every school of education preparing teachers of English, Library Science - or in fact any subject - will instill in their students the courage to select materials on their merits and to deplore "playing it safe" in order to avoid controversy. We hope they will let it be known that there are organizations such as Right to Read

ready to lend moral support if necessary, but more importantly eager to help them pass on to their students the joy of good literature and the breadth of vision that only a person who has studied all sides of a question can attain. We hope that all teachers and librarians will qualify themselves as truly professional so that they will be able to articulate the values of the material they select so that no parent or administrator can fail to understand the thought and care that goes into that process. Above all we wish you and your students good reading.

CITIZEN'S REQUEST FOR RECONSIDERATION OF A BOOK

(Reprinted, with permission of the National Council of Teachers of English, from page 17 of THE STUDENTS' RIGHT TO READ, NCTE: Champaign, Illinois, 1962)

The following form has been widely used and adapted to meet the censor. It offers an intelligent response to any attempted censorship of books, one that any school would be wise to copy or adapt to its own peculiar situation. Note especially item No. 9, an item which may be the most important part of the form, since it places the burden of proof on the censor (where it properly belongs). The teacher would be wise to remember, however, that item 9 is valuable and valid only where the English teacher attempts to help the parent and the student to find another book comparable in value. In no sense should any of the form be used as any easy cop-out for the English teacher, for he owes the censor an explanation of the problem of book selection.

Author Hardcover Paperback
Title
Publisher (if known)
Request initiated by _____
Telephone _____ Address _____
City _____
Complainant represents
_____ himself
_____ (name organization) _____
_____ (identify other group) _____

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1. To what in the book do you object? (Please be specific; cite pages.) _____
2. What do you feel might be the result of reading this book? _____
3. For what age group would you recommend this book? _____
4. Is there anything good about this book? _____
5. Did you read the entire book? _____ What parts? _____
6. Are you aware of the judgment of this book by literary critics? _____
7. What do you believe is the theme of this book? _____
8. What would you like your school to do about this book?
   _____ do not assign it to my child
   _____ withdraw it from all students as well as from my child
   _____ send it back to the English Department office for re-evaluation
9. In its place, what book of equal literary quality would you recommend that would convey as valuable a picture and perspective of our civilization? _____

_____
Signature of Complainant